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ABSTRACT

Two areas--understanding what rural education is and what its real needs are--are critical in preparing educators, specifically language arts educators, for a rural setting. Although the problems facing these teachers are many, minimal preparation and training at the college level deal with the rural setting. Mainly due to funding, modern technology and resources are not generally available--and the rural language arts teacher must be more imaginative, have more initiative, and be able to work with people, for a class to be successful. Salary (often below the norm), location (frequently isolated), and role (the rural educator must often perform many functions) also have an effect. The rural educator may only have a few who want/need advanced courses, resulting in a narrow curriculum and more pressure to individualize instruction for these students. Schools often stick with the traditional, and are wary of new teachers with different ideas. The following may be useful in meeting the needs of rural educators: establishing university contact persons interested in developing rural education; area consortiums of rural language arts teachers; advisory boards at the state, local, and federal levels; incentives, grants, and programs; technology sharing; computer networking; and working with rural organizations. (JMM)

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How NCTE Can Best Help the Rural Language Arts Educator in Rural America

By

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (77th, Los Angeles, CA, November 20-21, 1987).

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HOW NCTE CAN BEST HELP THE RURAL LANGUAGE ARTS EDUCATOR IN RURAL AMERICA

While working on the Rural Education Language Arts Committe, it became apparent that the first order of business was to identify what RURAL meant. After long discussions, both with committee members and other RURAL educators, a definition can be extrapolated. To be called a RURAL school or a RURAL educator, the following characteristics must exist: 1) the school must be small in size (under 400 for a four-year high school system) 2) the school and community must be isolated (not close to a large urban area and/or a large college/university) 3) the community must include an area that is sparsley populated. By applying these three criteria, the end result is that many private schools, such as the school I am presently employed with-the Missouri Military Academy in Mexico, Missouri, or schools located within easy reach of a large university/college town, or small schools located in new developmental areas outside an urban area are not applicable. RURAL schools and RURAL educators are self-contained communities that rely upon themselves for survival, and hopefully, progression. Coming from the Iowa Reconstruction Plan of the 1960's, many smaller RURAL schools were replaced with larger, but still small RURAL schools. Increasing the number of students through reorganization does not necessarily mean taking the RURAL out of the education process. Today, those visions of progress, the reorganized schools, find themselves facing the same crisis as the smaller schools they engulfed. In this world of BIGGER IS BETTER, especially in education, we must stop and realistically look at what RURAL education is all about. There are many considerations that must be examined; however, we must first place into perspective not only the disadvantages, but the advantages of RURAL schools in our society. We, as Language Arts instructors, profess a desire to communicate, both orally and through written form; however, our communication, as to date, is filled with quick fix ideas and simply paying omage to the concern for RURAL education. If we are serious, we must carefully consider the people, the communities, and the educational programs within the RURAL setting.

Since, by profession or occupation, we are all educators-specifically Language Arts educators, our first concern must be that of the instructor who leaves our colleges and universities and either goes to the RURAL setting and/or considers a RURAL setting. First, let us consider the teacher of Language Arts who decides that a RURAL setting is best for him or her. The first drawback encountered is a lack of preparation on the college level to deal with the RURAL setting. Even if that teacher has originally been in a RURAL setting, the four-to-five year absence from that setting has quite often caused an unnatural affinity for RURAL education. The professors, student teacher coordinators, and the counselors within the academic setting are basically urban bred or urbanites by choice-the result is no training and/or encouragement for the student teacher to train in or work within a RURAL setting. Far too often, the student teacher is placed in what the institute of higher learning considers is a somewhat ideal situation-this causes a problem since the new teacher seldom can find this ideal situation upon graduation. A suggested format to begin a reversal of this cumbersome problem would be the incorporation of a staff that understands what RURAL education is and further the real needs of RURAL education. Placing student teachers in RURAL settings could actually be a benefit to both the student teacher and the cooperating teacher. New insights into method could be brought by the student teacher to the RURAL setting and experience and a method of education seldom experienced could be demonstrated by the cooperating teacher. I would call this plan the IIHR Plan-its components are imagination, initiative, and human resources. "Those without, often create to become haves rather than havenots." In the RURAL setting, mainly due to funding, modern technology and an abundance of resources are not available-the end result is that the RURAL Language Arts teacher must be more imaginative, have more initiative, and be able to work with people (human resources) if that class of students is to be successful. Far too often today, the young as well as the experienced teachers, have at their disposal an arsenal of resources; however, they have forgotten the ingredients of teaching that are so important-once again-imagination, initiative, and incorporating others into the

educational process. We verbalize about producing better and more qualified Language Arts teachers; however, the process used is in long need of being overhauled.

As stated in the play, AND MRS. REARDON DRINKS A LITTLE, "I have taken so many educational courses I have euphenism of the brain." In the educational process, a course in RURAL education would definitely be helpful to the teacher of Language Arts who wishes to or thinks he or she might want to choose a RURAL setting. We cannot say that we are preparing teachers in the Language Arts, if we forget this large segment of our society. The new teacher needs an expansion in the job market and this market has been waiting patiently to be discovered. However, we cannot place all the blame on the institutes of higher learning. Other considerations must be mentioned. The salaries in a RURAL setting are often below the expected salary for a new teacher; however, when applied to expenditures, the result is more than evenly distributed. Another consideration is that of location. The young person first starting out may not wish to settle in this type of setting. There is nothing that can be done to change the surroundings; however, different approaches to lifestyles can be considered and studied. Another aspect is that the teacher in the RURAL setting often times has to wear many hats; drama instructor, speech coach, sports...the list goes on. Many new teachers feel ill prepared in many of these areas. I am not sure that specialized is what we are looking for in a new teacher of the Language Arts. I am not sure that specialization is what we are looking for in a new teacher of the Language Arts, or as far as that goes, in an experienced teacher. The expansion of a teacher, in many areas, is often beneficial to that teacher and the educational format.

Now enters into this scenerao, a very important element-the student. The effectiveness of teaching Language Arts in a RURAL setting can be measured in many ways; however, there is not a fix-all at the state level. Statewide curriculum has many merits; however, often this curriculum is established without financial and staff considerations. The RURAL teacher may have only one or two students who wish/need the advanced courses; however, try to sell a class for a small number of

students. The result is usually in the RURAL schools a narrow curriculum with the teacher trying to individualize and use any other approach to get that bright student better prepared for higher education. Add to this the lack of technological devices and that RURAL Language Arts teacher has to go into overdrive when it comes to imagination, initiative, and human resources.

Finally, a consideration that each of us confronts on a daily schedule, the institution itself, the school. Many small schools in a RURAL setting do not recruit the best for their students, they display apathy and simply take the fourth, fifth, or even the tenth choice. They say, "We cannot compete, so why try?" This problem is further developed by TURF RIGIDITY SYNDROME. The school does not want some new person coming into the community with a bunch of new ideas. The result is that many RURAL schools do not progress, but stick with the traditional way of doing things, not because it has proven to work or is better, but simply because that is the way it has always been done.

Now enters the interloper-finance. It is a proven fact, that percentage wise, RURAL education is not given its fair share when the educational funds are passed out. The federal, and too many state governments, say let the community GRASS ROOTS SYNDROME) take care of its own education. But, the financing of schools is based entirely upon population, not progression. The tax structure for education is quite difficult for the RURAL school. Large corporations tend to settle and support, through taxes and other devices, the urban area, but do not consider the RURAL schools. The legislative bodies, again, look at only population and what is popular for them, not the educational progress of this country. Percentage wise, with the youth leaving the farmland, due to want or necessity, the population is becoming older in the RURAL areas and it is quite difficult to get any capital improvement for education; higher salaries and money for technology is not even considered. The result is a "Catch 22." Even when progression is wanted, the funds are simply not available. Add to this the other consideration. Schools today strive for accrediation and recognition. However, the criteria established is such that many RURAL schools cannot even demonstrate what they are doing well in education due to space

and equipment restrictions. The result is that the RURAL schools often do not even try for accrediation. The federal government has a Department of Education that gives out excellence awards, but how many go to small RURAL schools? It appears that if you are not big you cannot be good.

But enough of this doomsday jargon. There is, and hopefully there will continue to be, an upswing in RURAL education. RURAL education with all its limiting forces is progressing and much can be learned from actions that have or are being taken. There are many local/regional organizations that are addressing this need. A first step is to let the colleges and universities know that they need to listen, not dictate, what is needed in RURAL education. The Language Arts teacher in a RURAL setting is now being provided with an option of services. Taped programs is a basically inexpensive process. Whether offered from an institution of higher learning or a resource center, this procedure has opened the doors for that single teacher of Language Arts or that small faculty of Language Arts teachers. Another service is called inservice. Many Language Arts teachers in a RURAL setting are dubious, since many programs presented have little or nothing to do with their situation. In-service must be provided by an organization that realizes the uniqueness of the RURAL school. Internships is another program, although not prevalent, that could be of real service to all participants. A trading of teachers from urban to RURAL would help diminish the wide gap of professionalism that now exists. The upgrading of standards and certificates for teachers is another approach being used. The RURAL teacher of Language Arts must attend classes to keep up with the trends in his/her academic area. This reeducation can be beneficial when colleges and universities are willing to provide more taped courses and courses more geared to the needs of this segment of their populace. Dissiminating quality programs is another choice. Added to this process is a coalition (some might say consortium) where several RURAL schools band together to offer an expansion of curriculum through courses attended by students and teachers from different geographically homogenous schools. This

arrangement may cause some logistic problems, however; if we are serious, these roadblocks can be demolished. The Language Arts teacher who identifies a bright or gifted student must press for classes in gifted and talented education and advanced placement classes. The trend of providing adequate education for all students appears to stress only the remedial and the bright and talented students are forgoteen. State department personnel is another factor to consider. Again, RURAL schools are dubious, in that, they often feel, and rightfully so, that state intereference results in new curriculum, but not necessairly what is needed. Here again is the need for educators to have a background in RURAL education. The urban dominated state personnel often simply cannot help improve the efficiency of teaching in a RURAL situation. A program that I read about was that of a professor adopting a RURAL school or schools. Not only does the professor help the local educational process, but in turn, the professor gains insight into RURAL education from the experience. An overriding problem that all of us must address is that many RURAL Language Arts teachers simplr do not know where to turn for help. Part of this committees responsibility is to provide needed information to the RURAL Language Arts teacher as to where and to whom assistance can be applied for any given situation. The NCTE has taken a step in the right direction by establishing this committee, however; this is only the first step in a larger procedure that is needed. This organization could best serve its RURAL members, and probably increase its number of RURAL members, if a contact person was established in each state (in some cases two or more contacts might be needed). It is easier for a RURAL teacher (or any teacher) to contact another teacher who is in a similar situation and/or a teacher who has concern for that teacher's situation.

The following considerations may be applied when considering NCTE'S role in meeting the needs of its RURAL constituents:

1. Establish on college/university campuses contact people who are interested in the development of RURAL education training for teachers of Language Arts, and further to introduce our future teachers to the many pluses of teaching in a RURAL situation.

2. Establish a working relationship between teachers of the Language Arts from RURAL schools in a geographical area to establish Language Arts consortiums.

3. Help establish advisory and advocate boards for RURAL education at the local, state, and federal levels...campaign to let everyone know the needs and successes of Language Arts in RURAL education.

4. Share with RURAL schools the technology that is geographically available. The urban schools can demonstrate the desire for better education by sharing the materials over the summer months.

5. Interacting computers...again, sharing of materials through a computer hook-up system.

6. Establish incentives for RURAL Language Arts educators and furthering grants and programs for the RURAL educator.

7. Working with other established RURAL organizations to help provide the best Language Arts program for a particular community.

RURAL education is alive and plausibily well today; however, it does need the help of all educators. The NCTE and each of you can provide the next step in helping our colleagues in the RURAL area, and I am sure that through this association, all of us can learn many new and innovative ideas in our field.

A list of organizations that work directly with RURAL schools and/or RURAL Language Arts teachers are:

People United for Rural Education
RR Box 35
Kamrar, Iowa 50132

KSU-Center for Rural Education and Small Schools
College of Education
Kansas State University
Manhattan, Kansas 66506

American Association of School Administrators, Small School Program
1801 N. Moore Street
Arlington, Virginia 22209

Bread Loaf School of English
Middlebury College
Middlebury, Vermont 05753

Office of Educational Research and Improvement
1200 19th. Street S.W.
Washington D.C. 20208

Forest City Model Rural Community Education Program
810 West K
Forest City, Iowa 50436

Cooperative School Services
College and Grove Streets
Rensselaer, Indiana 47978

UNI-Rural Education Committee
University of Northern Iowa
Cedar Falls, Iowa 50614

Compensatory Education Programs
US Department of Education
400 Maryland Ave. SW
ROB # 3, Room 3616
Washington DC 20202

Upper Midwest Small Schools Project
University of North Dakota
Box 8158 University Station
Grand Forks, North Dakota 58202

Rural Education Association
Department of Education
300 Education Building
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, Colorado 80523